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SCIENCE AND THE WAR

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ONE of the many stupendously important by-products of this world-conflict is the quickened interest of the public in scientific research and the material achievements which are its outcome—chiefly, I fear, in the material achievements. On every hand, in every department of militant activity, it has been made evident to the “man in the street” that scientific knowledge, competently applied, is a determining factor in defence and a prerequisite to victory.

In that remote period “before the war” science was to the average man of affairs a subject of languid interest, an interesting hobby for learned gentlemen advanced in years, an indispensable item in the preliminary training of doctors and engineers, of course, but otherwise devoid of vital bearing upon the everyday life of “practical” men. The speculations of astronomy might be very interesting, but after all the stars are exceedingly remote and not likely to

interfere with our businesses or our investments. Wireless telegraphy was thought of us as an isolated achievement, and never connected in the popular imagination with the science of physics. Dyes were taken for granted, never connected with the vision of a quiet and unobtrusive professor of chemistry who devised the method of their synthesis. Electric motive power was a profitable channel for investment, never thought of as the offspring of the brain of a shoemaker’s son labouring for a lifetime in a quiet laboratory in London. The great local surgeon perchance saved us from imminent death, but his success never brought to our minds the memory of the French chemist and the Scottish professor of surgery who rendered asepsis possible.

Upon this uninformed public consciousness the world-war suddenly arose and science dramatically came into its own and determined the march of events. Guns of unexampled range, explosives of unparalleled